

# ***The Country Emporium***

**BILSON'S OF COLAC  
1872 to 1952**

***By Ida McIntosh***

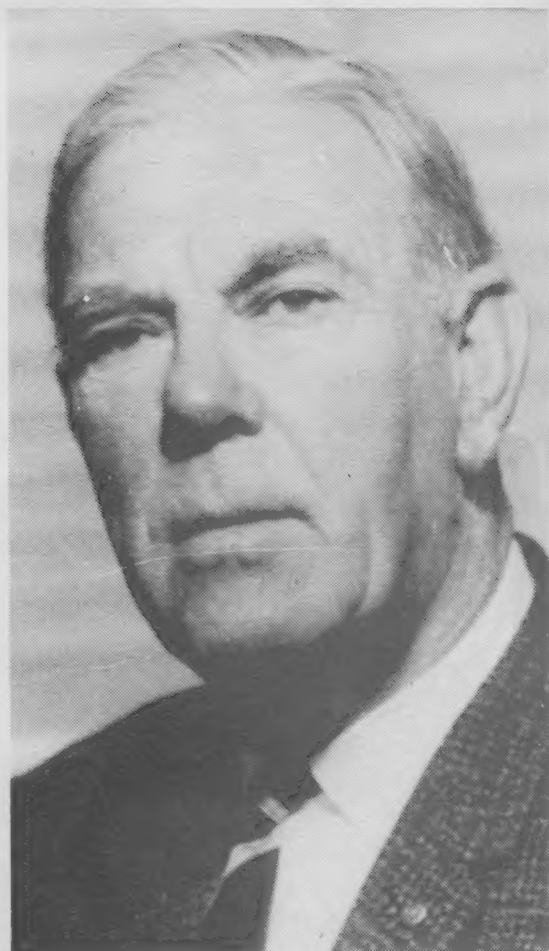


# The Bilson Era: Remarkable men and remarkable Colac enterprise

It could be said that the Bilson story commenced with the arrival in Colac of Thomas Ed-  
die Tulloh as far back as 1872. Mr T. E. Tulloh  
commenced business at that time.

It was, however, his fourth son, Colin Robertson  
Tulloh, who took over the family business in 1884 and laid  
the foundation to what was to become the largest mercan-  
tile business in any country town in Victoria.

In 1899, Mr Franklin Osland Bilson, the son of a Ballarat farmer,  
came to Colac from Warrnambool and bought into the Tulloh store.



Mr Alan Bilson

At this stage there were a drapery,  
ironmongery, grocery, and wine and  
spirits departments.

Later, by acquisition, an unbroken  
frontage of some 228 feet was achieved.

By then the store was composed of a  
series of seven buildings joined by  
numerous archways, the total area be-  
ing more than 50,000 square feet, with  
an additional 25,000 square feet of  
cellars.

In 1912, a branch store was opened at  
Alvie, and Mr McKenzie was one of the  
earlier managers. Later, Mr French  
who was well-known to the district, was  
made manager, a position he held for  
some 30 years — 1912 also saw one of  
the most spectacular fires which occur-  
red at Bilson's in Murray-st; it followed  
a burglary.

Perhaps the prosperity of Bilson's  
was due at least in part to the suc-  
cessive remarkable men of managerial  
qualities who led the firm through the  
hazardous times of bushfires, droughts  
and rural recessions.

It was these men, involved with com-  
munity life and their concern for peo-  
ple, who produced something which  
must have been unique even for those  
days.

It was said that Bilson's was more  
than a store, it was an institution.

It was born in an era when mobility  
was limited (few people ever travelled  
to Melbourne) so that business was  
transacted in such a way that an en-  
vironment of regeneration both within  
the firm and the community was  
created.

This policy of regeneration continued  
throughout its 50 years of operation.

Although the firm later advertised  
itself as universal providers, it made no  
intrusion on the preserves of the  
smaller, specialised shopkeepers,  
preferring to keep them as valued  
customers rather than business com-  
petitors.

## On community

The maintenance of the company was  
dependent on the community just as the  
community was dependent on Bilsons.

The system of bookkeeping was such  
that customers were assured that  
Bilson's would see them through until  
"the wool or the dairy cheque arrived"  
or until "things got better", and so an  
attitude of mutual trust was establish-  
ed.

In the early part of the century,  
Bilsons had 30 horses to cope with their  
deliveries.

Local "smithies" and saddlers pro-  
spered, deliveries were made from  
Portland and Rokewood, to Lorne and  
Apollo Bay, and as one customer put it,  
"Bilson's was the lifeline of the Ot-  
ways".

Orders were always fulfilled prompt-  
ly even though they might include such  
items as "repairs to dentures" or a hat  
for our Millie, she has red hair".

One of the remarkable men whose  
business life within the firm spanned  
some 30 years, was Mr Alan Osland  
Bilson, son of Mr F. O. Bilson.

Alan Bilson enlisted in England in the  
RFC in the First World War, at the end  
of which he commenced a course in  
medicine at Melbourne University.

In 1921 he relinquished this to enter  
the company as junior clerk to Mr J. P.  
Callanan.

Mr Callanan was then Managing  
Director, having been appointed to this  
position when the business was con-  
verted into a proprietary company in  
1913.

In 1928, Mr Callanan, who was a  
highly-esteemed businessman, suf-  
fered a heart attack and died, and Mr  
Alan Bilson succeeded him as  
manager.

Alan Bilson entered into this new role  
at a time when other places were begin-  
ning to feel the pinch of the Great  
Depression.

Ironically 1929-32 were considered the  
golden years for Bilson's which provid-  
ed good employment for so many, and  
service to the community.

Towns folk were treated to the order  
man calling twice weekly, with the  
goods delivered later — thus providing  
a quality of life to what must be con-  
sidered, by today's standards, the  
pampered housewife.

Although extended credit was  
available, Bilson's were conscious of  
the need for cash flow and so had been  
quick to initiate the scheme of coupons  
for cash.

They also gave five percent discount  
for settlement within 14 days, not to  
mention the joy of joys to the  
youngsters who helped Mother with the  
messages, and found a bag of mixed  
sweets awaiting them if the account  
was paid promptly.

## Daily balance

Books were balanced daily and  
although customers numbered some  
two-and-a-half-thousand, the margin of  
error was minimal, all done without  
benefit of computers and with only the  
occasional dip into the "Short-N-over".

The "Short-N-over" was a tin of small change to solve the problem of that elusive threepence in the afternoon balance.

In 1935 a furniture and upholstery factory was added to the company. A high standard of "made to order" furniture manufactured by skilled craftsmen.

During the Second World War, Mr Alan Bilson once again enlisted, this time in the RAAF, Mr Claude Burnett carried on through rather tenuous times with a much-depleted staff.

As was the tradition in crisis Bilsons' staff were active in all the war effort schemes — "bundles for Britain", food parcels and so on.

By 1950 the winds of change were felt in retail merchandising and the inevitability of the mergers and takeovers became more apparent — "go big or go out" seemed to be the new order.

It was in the interest of survival that in 1952 Bilson's amalgamated with Foy Gibsons, the old established Melbourne based firm, and Mr Alan Bilson retired from the managerial position in favor of Mr Les Atyeo.

Mr Atyeo had long been associated with the firm and had an extensive knowledge and understanding of all facets of the operation.

In the same year the store suffered a huge fire, gutting the main part of the building.

Rebuilding was carried out and the layout of the premises changed.

The grocery department effected a "new look" and took on the very-ultra cash and carry trolleys.

In line with Foy Gibson's policy, one door only was made in the Murray-st frontage so that the impulse buyers would be exposed to the "push lines" displayed near the door.

#### Little buckets

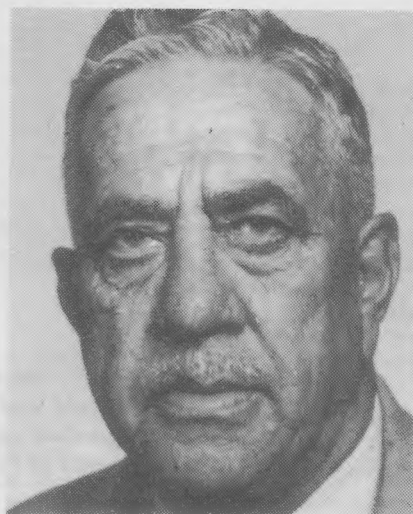
Gone were the little buckets which piled their endless journeys backwards and forwards on the thin overhead wire cables bringing change and dockets to the customer, or the occasional "billet doux" to the handsome young man in the hardware department.

Thursdays no longer saw the farmers with their wonderful wide-brimmed Birregurra hats shaking hands with Alan and discussing the price of lambs at the market.

Gone were the small, high Bentwood chairs (so beloved by the antique collectors of today) strategically placed for the comfort of the customer, and with them, so it seemed, some of the spirit and the charm of the old store.

Foy Bilson continued to prosper, the social clubs connected with the firm worked in much the same way, but although the managers and staff valiantly strove to preserve the pattern of merchandising acceptable to the Col-ac clientele, the ever present voice of "head office" (Melbourne) presented more than a small challenge.

In 1955, Foy Bilson sold out to Cox Brothers and so signalled the demise of the old firm and, indeed, a way of life which many were to mourn the loss of for years to come.



Mr Bob Bilson

Below: After the disastrous fire in 1952 Bilson's emporium was rebuilt to cope with the new era in marketing. Bilson's had always occupied the prime real estate position in Murray St. Today Target now owns the old Bilson emporium and it is one of the most modern stores in the City of Colac.





Dear Nora,

I thought you  
might like this  
book. Have fun  
picking out the  
ones you worked  
with. A quiet good  
reading. hope  
every body well  
We love well

Love

Ruth

In 1952 when the firm of Bilsons Pty Ltd. amalgamated with the old and respected firm of Foy and Gibsons, of Melbourne, this signalled not only the end of a business which had served the community of Colac and district in a particular way, but the end of an era.

Thirty years later it seemed appropriate to record the story of this unique business.

Unfortunately, the big fire at Foy-Bilsons in 1952 destroyed the documentation from which to work, so it is to the many kind people who came forward offering personal reminiscences, photographs etc. that we are indebted; these include ex-staff members, former customers, managers, and the late Alan O. Bilson.

In recording the happenings of this period it is hoped the reader will forgive the many digressions, but it was felt that Bilsons was such an integral part of "village life" that it was difficult to separate the events which led up to the formation of the firm and, perhaps, these events may serve at least in part as an explanation of the reason for its success.

— Ida McIntosh

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# THE COUNTRY EMPORIUM

The Bilson Story really begins with Mr Thomas Eddie Tulloh who was born in Earnhill Forest, Scotland in 1814. T. E. Tulloh showed great leadership qualities at a very early age, suffering from asthma he was sent with his brother to Jamaica.

After three years he was able to take charge of a sugar plantation on which there were 800 slaves.

During the time he was in Jamaica a rebellion broke out among the slaves all over the island and T. E. Tulloh played a prominent part in quelling the rebellion and pacifying the rebels.

He returned to Scotland but later emigrated to Van Dieman's Land.

T. E. Tulloch subsequently came to Portland where he took up land on the Wannoo (15,000 acres) near Hamilton, and successfully ran a sheep station.

It was in 1872 and with this background of diverse range of experiences that he established a storekeeping business in Colac.

He took a keen interest in local matters and was active in church and later the hospital.

It was however, T. E. Tulloh's fourth son, Colin Robertson Tulloh (born 1859 at Harrow), who entered his father's business in Colac and in 1884 laid the foundations for what was later to become Bilsons Pty Ltd of Colac.

Colin Robertson Tulloh took up a large area of land in Beech Forest on which he spent thousands of pounds on development; he also held land at Ballintore.

Colin Robertson Tulloh took a keen interest in the affairs of the district, being for some time Chairman of Directors of the Colac Dairying Co., member of the Shire Council, Chairman of the Colac Waterworks Trust, Committeeman of the Colac Turf Club, and Vestryman of St John's Church of England.

In 1900, C. R. Tulloh built "Cooriminta", at Elliminyt, on what became known as Tulloh's Hill. This was a brick house of generous

proportions, set in a handsome garden.

It was later purchased by the Anglican Diocese of Ballarat and converted into a home for young people, known as St Cuthberts Boys Home.

In 1978 the original home and some additional cottages were sold to the Glastonbury Homes group and the old house was demolished.

It was in 1899 that Colin Robertson Tulloh sold to Mr F. O. Bilson. Mr Bilson came from farming stock at Ballarat but had been in business in the Warrnambool district.

He took up residency in Colac earlier in that year, but his wife and family were delayed by the imminence of the birth of a son.

This was significant in the annals of the Bilson story as it was this son Alan Osland Bilson who was to become one of the great and longest serving managers in the firm.

## ANNALS

In 1900 when Colin Robertson Tulloh retired from the firm the town was already the centre of a thriving rural area.

It had survived the rigors of early settlement in 1838 through the traumas of the gold rush at Ballarat and the land boom to the inevitable crash in the eighties.

The Otway Ranges had been opened and suffered its devastating fires.

Lake Corangamite had receded and flooded once more and Colac had experienced its first Royal visit.

The town had already some substantial buildings, Mr Thomas Gamble having established his brickyard in the 1850's and produced a fine quality brick from local clay.

The "large sod chimneys and the thatched or bark roofs" had long disappeared.



In 1900 Mr C. R. Tulloh built "Cooriminta" and for the next 70 odd years was a landmark at Elliminyt until it was demolished in 1978.

Bilsons, or Tullohs as it was still called, catered for the many needs of the community, being well stocked with grocery, footwear, hardware, clothing and wine and spirits (the licence for which had been acquired with the purchase of Polwarth Stores).

Much of the stock was made or grown within the district. The Iletts of Warrion were attributed with making the first cheese in the district and, although Ballarat was the major outlet for their product, no doubt some of it found its way to Colac.

With the formation of the Colac Dairying Company in 1893, a larger range of dairy products was available.

Polwarth Stores, which was purchased by Tullohs, was one of the earliest places of commerce in Colac, having commenced operations at the Crook and Plaid site in 1856 (No. 1 Murray-St).

It was, however, in 1867 that the business was transferred from Messrs Robertson and Rea to Messrs Robertson and McIntosh, who set up business two doors further along and traded under the name of Polwarth Stores.

It could be noted that wine and spirit licences were carefully controlled; Colac like other early settlements in the Colony had suffered from the abuse of alcohol and stories were told of "incidents" occurring with the intrusion of drunken settlers into the Aboriginal Camp along the Barongarook Creek.

Perhaps it was this which had given rise to the formation of the many Temperance groups within the community.

Before the turn of the century, Colac had seen many such organisations; notable among these were the Benefit Lodge Sons of Temperance 1868-1887, Total Abstinence Society, Good Templars Lodge 1873, Gospel Temperance and Blue Ribbon Mission.

It was during these years that Colac was producing wine in reasonable quantities.

It is recorded that in 1864 Elliminyt had 6000 vines, Irrewarra 1500. Later the Warrion Hills were renowned for their grapes.

## PRIZES

Mr Charles Buchanan, of Beeac, a long-serving member and twice president of the Shire Council held a cup gained at the Royal Melbourne Show of November 1874 for his wine.

The Martin Family of Warrion, later became known for the quality of their wine. The main outlet for this was the Warrion wine saloon, close to Martin's property.

It is now the Ti-Tree Hotel.

It appeared that the volcanic soil of the Warrions was conducive to the cultivation of grapes with a distinctive flavor.

In addition to "local" wines, Polwarth Stores advertised imported wines, and it is after one of these imported wines that one of the streets of Colac was so named.

It seemed that when Messrs Robertson and McIntosh ran Polwarth Stores they did remarkably big business with the outside landowners and, on settling days, dispensed free champagne.

William Atkin McIntosh had built one of the earlier and charming houses on the banks of Barongarook Creek and, being a member of the Moy Clan in Scotland, called the house Moy Villa.

In the process of selling it to Mr Theodore Hancock some years later, Mr Hancock asked the name of the house and being told Moy Villa replied "judging from the stock of champagne bottles it should be called Moet Villa. Moet and Chandon, of France, are still famous for their wines, and although the garden is reduced in size, Moet Villa stands very well preserved and adjoining Moet-st.

## QUALITY

By 1900 the quality of life for many of the townsfolk of Colac seemed considerably enriched.

There appeared to have evolved a type of polite society, with afternoon tea parties, church functions and musical soirees.

This had a most beneficial effect on trade; by this time Bilsons was a double-fronted building with a vast range of merchandise, specialising in

ladies' apparel, millinery, the value of this department to the firm could not be underestimated.

Millinery was a highly-skilled trade and some milliners were brought from Melbourne, others were local girls who came highly recommended to be trained under the ever watchful eye of the "head lady".

Hats at this time were in the main wide brimmed and so gave wonderful scope to the artistic ingenuity of the milliner.

Gossamers were much favored for travelling and helped with already multi-pin secured hats.

One must remember that this was the era of the wasp waist and tight lacing.

Older woman regarded it as unsuitable "to go out in their figures" this meant donning a loose mantle over their clothes to walk down Murray-st.

## STYLES

Fashions were largely dictated by news from "home" where the styles were greatly influenced by Court Circles where the aging Queen Victoria still presided.

Her death in 1901 did little to diminish the impact which had already been made in her sixty-year reign.

Mourning clothes were most important, and it was customary to confer with the "head lady" at Bilsons if the death of a loved one was imminent so that suitable clothes could be prepared for the funeral and the mourning period to follow.

Deep mourning involved the wearing of black from head to toe, complete with jet jewellery and black edged handkerchief.

In cases of sudden death it was not uncommon for the seamstresses at Bilsons to work late to fulfil such an order.

Funerals of those days were in a much less restrained manner.

Business houses such as Bilsons closed their doors as the funeral cortege passed by and the windows were usually draped in black crepe.

The undertaker preceded the horse-drawn hearse on foot.

The beautifully-groomed horses were chosen for their black coats and were dressed with black head plumes; should the deceased be a child the plumes were white.

With the opening of the forests, there were many bad accidents recorded and it was said that on one occasion, when a man from Barongarook suffered a serious back injury (there being no ambulances then), the most suitable vehicle to transport him to the hospital for treatment was Mr Geo. James' hearse.

As the hearse was driven quietly along the street, by custom, the gentlemen "out of respect" removed their hats.

It so happened that Mrs Clements, wife of the licensee of the Union Club Hotel, was taking the air on the balcony at the hotel.

It was at this point that the accident victim felt a little better and raised his head and peered out of the hearse.

Mrs Clements did what any lady of refinement and tight lacing would do under the circumstances and fainted quite away and had to be revived with smelling salts and a nip of her husband's brandy...such was the pace of Murray-st in those days.



Customers were the all important thing at Bilsons. This pre 1910 picture shows customers being served.





Murray Street and Gellibrand St. intersection. Looking west pre 1910 with the gas light fitting in the centre of the street.

## Peace in the new century

The pace of life appeared to remain much about the same for the first decade of the new century. Queen Victoria had passed on and the few Boer War veterans of the Colac district had returned and some did not.

A peace Memorial with a brass plaque listing the names of these veterans was built in the market square in the form of a Public Library.

This was in operation until 1969 when the present library was opened. The old library was subsequently demolished in 1970.

Gracious living was experienced by many townsfolk and a number of splendid houses were being built, some designed by Robert Hamilton, son of the earlier and highly esteemed architect Alexander Hamilton.

The ornamental double storied brick Victorian designs appeared to be at least temporarily abandoned in favor of the wide verandah types so suited to the Australian climate.

Among these newer designs was number 56 Moore-st which was built for Mr Forbes whose premises had been in Murray-st opposite Bilsons.

Built of brick with generous verandahs and stables at the rear this seemed to epitomise the era of gracious living of those people of Colac.

In 1904 the Colac telephone exchange was established and Bilsons became number 15 and later numbers 27, 31, and 49 were added.

Bilsons forged ahead and it seemed that the business community caught the rhythm of the land and its elements upon which their customers were so dependent.

Finance was arranged in such a way that farmers were "carried" until money was available; many firms such as J.A. Thompson and sons, plumbers, tinsmiths and tankmakers, made up their books only twice a year.

J. G. Johnstone & Co. Stock and Station agents were well established (1883) and it was said that many young farmers received their "chance in life" by the genuine help from J. G. Johnstone & Co. who loaned the money for the land and stock, while it was Bilsons who extended credit for the household goods...and all waited for the first cheques to filter through.

Perhaps, it was that the managers and staff of Bilsons had experienced some connection with the land that they were so in tune with rural life.

Generally speaking graziers were expected to pay their accounts yearly when the wool cheque arrived, dairymen a little more frequently.

Colac being the centre of such a diverse area at least a certain level of cash flow was maintained.

Dairy farmers to the south experienced their lean periods when "the cows were out" sometimes as much as two months earlier than their counter parts in other areas.

The onion growers, potato growers, pig farmers, loggers and others paid their accounts at other times.

When accounts were settled some form of recognition was made either by a visit to the cellar or sweets for the children.

One ex-customer said that on her "father's rare visits to Colac he was taken down to the cellar to taste the wine

although, as he told Mr Bilson Snr., he was no connoisseur of wines.....our orders which came out by train to Wyelangta Railway station were enormous the firm put themselves to no end of trouble to please the customers.....remembering opening the case of groceries knowing that as well as everything that had been ordered there would be a free huge bag of lollies."

In 1910, Bilsons decided to start a branch store at Alvie. This appeared to be a logical site for this new enterprise as with the subdivision of the Robertson Estates onion growing (as well as other crops) was taking on at Cororooke.



One of the well stocked departments in Bilsons prior to the 1912 fire.



THE STAFF AT BILSONS  
1906 — 1932 — 1952







The potential of onion growing in the district was recognised and indeed was fulfilled when Cororooke went on to become one of the principal onion growing areas in Australia and the "Colac Brown Spanish" was to achieve world-wide reputation and some time later to win the Great St. Louis Exposition in USA and the Wembley Exhibition in Great Britain.

Messrs McKenzie and McConachie respectively, were among the early managers of the Alvie Store — later Mr French was appointed, a position he held for some 30 years.

By this time the big store had a considerable frontage to Murray-st, having acquired premises as far down as Gellibrand-st.

In 1912 Mr J. P. Callanan succeeded Mr Alfred Heap as manager of the main store there being a small company of share holders viz, Mr Albert Feddersen, Mr and Mrs F. O. Bilson and Mr J. P. Callanan.

Mr J. P. Callanan was remembered as a kind and good businessman; one ex-customer recalls that "when men from Chapple Vale were driving stock into the Colac Market they would call at Bilsons, no doubt for an order to be made up, and they would be offered warmth and friendliness and given the opportunity to change into dry clothes."

At that time Bilsons had a number of horses to help with the deliveries.



Mr J. P. Callanan  
Bilsons Manager

The district was zoned into various areas viz, Stoneyford, South Purrumbete, Carlisle River, Chapple Vale, Warncoort, Birregurra, and so on.

On Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays the order men would travel into these areas and, on Thursdays, the covered wagon would set out with the deliveries.

This would mean that the delivery man had to stay two nights away.

The wagon was drawn by three horses and they would return on Saturdays.

Mr Ralph Russell, who later became a delivery man, was noted for his care of the horses and his ability to pack the wagon.

Horses were stabled at the rear of Bilsons and were turned out to rest at the weekends at a paddock on the corner of Hart and Wilson-sts.

Colac had long rallied to the wave of patriotism that had

bestirred the nation; it was however not until 1912 that Empire Day celebrations were carried out on a much larger scale.

Although this day had been celebrated in Colac for some 20 years previously by a combined school childrens' ceremony the occasion was charged with more enthusiasm when Mr Albert J. Handley was made secretary and organiser.

The whole of the townspeople took a keen interest in their day, and Murray-st was bright with bunting, arches, and decorations, while hundreds of private houses joined in with the general decoration scheme.

Bilsons, as with other business houses, participated in the celebrations and hundreds of lanterns were used to light Murray-st.

But 1912 was not the most fortunate of years for Bilsons, because it was only a few months after these celebrations that a big fire occurred, an account of which was written in the Colac "Herald" of the 4th of November 1912 as follows....

"A disastrous fire occurred early on Friday morning at Messrs Bilson and Co. Stores.

When the brigade arrived on the scene the flames had gained a firm hold.

And what destruction the flames were effecting.

The splendid stock of ladies' dress wear, the glorious spring creations of the milliners art, were all seized upon

and provided excellent fuel in assisting the conflagration.

The strong water pressure placed an effective weapon in the hands of the firemen to fight against the flames, and under Capt. Parkes the men set to work with a will.

For a time the attack made little impression, but gradually the water gained the supremacy, and the angry flames had to submit to a more effective force.

But this was not accomplished before enormous damage was sustained.

The large stock of furniture suffered considerably and the clothing and millinery department were in ruins and the grocery department was much damaged. Neither did the private rooms upstairs escape altogether.

The firemen deserve great credit, they had to take many necessary risks, but the way in which they did their duty showed conclusively that the town possesses a brigade of which it can be proud.

Much sympathy has been expressed towards Mr F. O. Bilson.

He received many offers of aid from local tradesmen which were gratifying to him.

The insurances amount to ten thousand pounds in the Patriotic Company, and five thousand pounds in the Victoria Co. In our advertising columns the firm announces that business will be conducted as usual."



The fire of 1912 left its toll of loss. These people were photographed outside the store next day.



This very early photograph of Murray St, looking east with Bilsons store on the left.

## Big improvements at Bilsons after the 1912 fire

After the 1912 fire, Bilsons was restored with some improvements. The office was centrally situated and so was conveniently placed to all departments.

**A gravity-fed device for transporting docket and change, etc. was effected – this was done by the installation of two sets of rails leading from the office to the boot, and millinery departments, respectively.**

Dockets were placed in round containers and rolled down to the cash desk where they dropped into a deposit cage, the cashier would receipt the docket and, with the change inserted in the ball container, “rail” it back to the department where it was presented to the customer.

This was quite a satisfactory method, but it was later superseded by a more sophisticated overhead system which was marketed by Lamson Paragon; this consisted of small wood and brass buckets which ran on tension wires and were directed to all departments.

These remained in use until 1952.

By 1914 the rainfall in the district was described as “patchy”.

It was at this stage that some farmers were ex-

perimenting, and those in the Cressy, Lismore area turned their attention to the fat lamb industry with the addition of crop growing (which had hitherto been of primary concern).

The Colac Agricultural High School (later the Colac High School) had been established in 1913 and was used for experiments in crop growing in this regard.

**The rains did not come and even the townsfolk watched wistfully at the dark disappearing clouds.**

Clouds of a different nature, however, were gathering in Europe – these were the clouds of war which, when they ultimately broke, were to alter the shape of things to come.

It was 1914 amid rumours and speculation of war that Bilsons hung out their flags and lanterns to celebrate Empire Day, and perhaps this day took on a new meaning, and so the celebration was used for the ensuing five years to raise money for the Serbian, French and British

Red Cross and the amount of 10,205 pounds was cleared for that purpose during those years.

Many Colac “boys” answered the call to arms, some of whom were Bilsons employees.

Mr Lindsay Osland Bilson, son of Mr F. O. Bilson, was accepted into the British Imperial Camel Corps; his brother Alan was only 15 when the war broke out but some time later enlisted in the Royal Air Force.

Alan Osland Bilson had been a student at Melbourne Grammar where he became Captain of Bromly House, a member of the first 18 and the school's feather, and lightweight champion.

Further laurels were to come to him in the ring when he won the Lightweight South of England Championship of the RFC in London.

The 1914-18 war period was one of great stress for so many. The drought peaked in 1915 and the Government helped with fodder while the railways carried water to the stricken areas.

Bilsons sought once more to ease the financial burden for their customers.

**Not all was gloom at this time and with the post fire renovations completed business was carried out with as much enthusiasm as ever.**

Some of the windows had been replaced and

additional show cases were built.

Mr Callanan, as manager, had long been aware of the value of display.

Perhaps it was in the Christmas of 1914 that his talent in this direction reached its zenith, when the Christmas display was set up in the window of the furniture department under the management of Mr Davey.

Who could have imagined that the beautiful doll (as most people thought) sleeping in the cot was in fact the real thing?

And the fair curls splayed about the pillow were those of Mr and Mrs Callanan's little two-year-old daughter, Dulcie, who, when the lights were turned off for the last time about 9 pm, was carried upstairs still sound asleep and completely unaware of having spent the previous three hours in the shop window?

Advertising became an important part of Bilsons policy.

They ran regular advertisements in the Colac “Herald” and also put out seasonal sale bills.

The fashion for women now had changed markedly.

The wasp waist had been replaced by the softer outline, and the large hats were now reduced in size.





The advent of the motor car, saw many changes at Bilsons. This picture was of the front of Bilsons in the early 1930's.

By 1920 the millinery and dressmaking department employed from 20 to 25 girls.

The furniture department had also changed and now exhibited the lighter, which plainer designs having replaced the heavier Victorian and Edwardian styles.

Once more there were some changes in architecture and one of the surprises of the times came a little later with the completion of the Edwardian house built for Dr Otto Bayer (now Legacy House).

This was alleged to be the first brick veneer house built in Colac, and apparently excited much interest in the town.

Gas had for many years been the method of lighting the streets and homes of the Colac, the Colac Gas Co. having been formed in 1887 (before that date kerosene lamps were used).

It was decided by Bilsons to instal their own electricity plant; this was a water-cooled system and was most successful, and they were even able to offer a "hook up" to Dr Brown's Hospital in Gellibrand-st, an offer which was accepted.

A town plant was ultimately built to supply Colac, but this was subsequently destroyed by fire in 1922 and so in 1923 the SEC power was connected to Colac.

The old gaslights, some minus fittings, remained

in the streets for some years, the one in Murray-st, at the Gellibrand intersection appeared to be particularly vulnerable to the erring drivers of those "new-fangled machines called motor cars" - its battered base bore testimony to those sad onslaughts.

Gradually the "boys" returned from the war, a war which had taken such a toll of life, the latter however, were not the only casualties, as during those troubled times Colac had suffered a severe influenza-type epidemic which resulted in a number of deaths in the district.

So pressed had the local hospital been that an infectious ward was set up in the Colac showground.

It was in 1919 that the Otway Ranges had a most disastrous fire which devastated forest and farm alike.

The community rallied and Bilsons, with others, made available goods and services to the fire victims.

By then the population of the Shire had reached 14,500.

In 1920 Alan Osland Bilson had returned from England and had become a Medical Student at the Melbourne University but relinquished his course to enter the firm in Colac, in 1921 he became junior clerk to Mr J. P. Callanan, and so it was that Bilsons entered into the third decade of their operations.

## Big changes in the "Golden Era"

It was during the third decade of Bilsons operations that the pattern of merchandising experienced certain changes.

It was thought that the advent of the motor car was one of the major factors in effecting these changes, although the office systems improved with such additions as the "Burroughs" machines.

The long-term changes were many, not the least of these being that it was the car that made it possible for the farmers' wives to personally shop with ease while their menfolk were at "the yards".

Bilsons saw the need for change and so the first motorised vehicle was purchased.

Mr Callanan had noted the efficiency with which a certain member of staff could handle his family car; he was the young Dudley Stalker and, although then not 18, he was asked to gain a licence as soon as possible.

This was achieved and so the young Mr Stalker took charge of the first motorised deliveries for Bilsons.

Later six large trucks and two motorcycles were added to the fleet.

Some horsedrawn vehicles were retained, however, for many years, later, and were only phased out as further motor vans were procured.

### Terang

In 1924, Mr H. L. Miles came from Terang to take up an appointment with Bilsons, he was made manager of the materials department.

Mr Miles had unerring judgement in his buying for his departments.

Buying took him to Melbourne each week where his business was transacted with such firms as Paterson Laing and Bruce, Sargoods, and others.

Mr Miles caught the train to Melbourne each Wednesday at 6 am and headed for the Commercial Travellers Club where the merchants ran their business.

Materials ranged from the fashionable sponge cloth, silks, Japanese Fuji silk to the heavy blue serge for suits and boys' trousers.

Large orders of Manchester were indented from England.



Inside the store

An extensive trade was done in dress materials.

The home dressmaker contributed much to the family economy, but sometimes dressmakers were employed in the home on a daily basis and were engaged up to as much as three weeks at a time, to cope with the family sewing which frequently included repair work, the making of curtains and hemming of sheets.

In the outer areas the dressmaker often found it necessary to live in for a week or two.

The mark-up on materials during those days was 25 percent.

This seemed to allow for the employment of a full staff.

Female staff generally wore black dresses with detachable easy to launder white collars.

The style of frock was left to the individual.

Remnant sales were conducted about twice a year and these were very popular.

Bilsons knew their customers by name; buyers in the Ladies' showroom frequently bought a dress with a certain customer in mind — naturally the buyer took great care not to commit the greatest sin, that of duplicating a style.

Millinery, glove and shoe departments all co-operated with the showroom staff to outfit madame.

Thursday was Market Day and became the social event of the week.

A great rapport was

established between shop assistant and customer, and it was not unusual for the shop girl to become a trusted confidant and was sometimes the recipient of a jar of clotted cream, or some fresh eggs, or even a sample of the latest "batch of homemade Chutney".

These were accepted as a gift from one friend to another.

#### Respect

An attitude of mutual respect prevailed. Bilsons customers, generally speaking, displayed a great deal of sensitivity towards the staff.

It was considered in poor taste for a customer to shop carrying goods which had been purchased elsewhere, particularly if the wrapping revealed the name of an opposition firm.

Brown paper hat bags had the firms name printed as did the large cardboard suit and dress boxes.

It seemed that customers liked to protect the staff from the knowledge that they might have been suited at an opposition firm.

Bilsons' printing was, in the main, done locally, as they firmly believed that by using local tradesmen that a process of regeneration within the business community would result.

Traders in Colac, although competitive in their businesses, were in fact quite a united group.

A traders' association had been formed about 1918, which not only benefited the traders but which was interested in all matters pertaining to the

welfare of the town and district.

Some of the activities of the association included the initial movement for the establishment of electric light for Colac and in the providing of a motor fire reel for the Colac Fire Brigade (the result being a reduction in the fire insurance rate of the Town of Colac).

The whole of the principal business proprietors of Colac were members.

Mr A. E. Feddersen represented Bilsons and was for some time chairman of the association.

So good was the spirit of camaraderie within the organisation that a male concert party was formed of about 26 members; this was highly successful and performed to both local and district audiences.

When times were hard, the traders stood together; they had already established a donation scheme which was controlled by members and had proved to be a great help to them.

Initially Bilsons in common with others had tried to employ as many "returned soldiers" as possible, but with the onset of the Depression, so started the endless stream of unlicensed door-to-door hawkers, who peddled a wide range of products from paper sachets of shampoo to "original water colors," and while these men posed no real threat to the established merchants of the town, some of the other itinerants who were legitimate businessmen did.

One such young man who zealously set up his barrow in Colac was actively discouraged by the locals and so moved on to Warrnambool where he settled — his name was Fletcher Jones.

In 1925, Mr Alan O. Bilson married Miss Constance Rankin.

Miss Rankin was the daughter of Mr and Mrs John Rankin, of Cororooke. Mr and Mrs Rankin, were of Scottish descent with close ties with the land.

Miss Rankin's sister Mary had been associated with the firm of Bilsons where she had been in charge of the dressmaking department which employed some 20-30 staff.

In 1928, Bilsons suffered a severe blow in the sudden death at Kerang of Mr John Callahan.

Mr Callanan, whose senior son Frank was already working in the firm, left a wife and young family of four sons and two daughters. Two of the younger sons, John and Leo joined the staff of Bilsons at later dates.

It was at this time that Mr Alan O. Bilson succeeded Mr Callanan to the position of general manager, and Mr Lindsey O. Bilson and Mr F. O. (Bob) Bilson, joined their brother Alan on the Board of Directors.

#### Golden

Despite the ominous indication of the impending deep recession, 1929 to 1932 were regarded as the golden years for Bilsons.

Mr Alan Bilson was associated with many local organisations and some of these organisations not only benefitted from his wise counsel but often received good practical help.

Bilsons' staff arranged themselves in social clubs and one group arranged an annual hospital ball; this was quite an event on the social calendar.

These netted quite a handsome profit so that a good donation to the hospital resulted.

One year Bilsons were able to provide tennis courts for the hospital staff.

It was in 1929 that Mr Franklin Osland Bilson died, just a year after his son Alan had been appointed manager to the firm which he (Franklin O.) had commenced some 30 years previously.

As the thirties proceeded so did the recession and once more Bilsons, as with others, were called upon to see their customers through.

It was said that Mr Alan Bilson never refused help where it could be given, and always exercised the greatest discretion in these matters.

His interest stretched yet further as he involved himself in so many aspects of the towns welfare.

It was Mr Alan Bilson who, with a few others formed the first Colac Rotary Club.

It was this interest in the betterment of the town which led him to regard the popular cry for decentralisation of industry with great interest.

It was thus decided that Bilsons should lead the way in this direction and so by 1938 a building on the corner of Hesse and Dennis-sts was purchased and a business was opened as a furniture repair shop.

Mr C. W. Veale, a highly-skilled craftsman, was made manager.

As the demand increased, machinery and equipment was installed for the manufacture of furniture and general cabinet making, French polishing, etc.

This was built gradually to the stage where about 16 people were employed.

Items manufactured included made-to-order cabinets and fittings, kitchen cupboards and fittings, all upholstered furniture, shop fitting, etc.

Most of the timber used in manufacture came from the Otways.

At each Colac P. and A. Show, samples of factory products were displayed and drew very favorable comments.



Murray St. looking east from the Corangamite intersection with the Austral Hotel and Bilsons on the left.

## Les Atyeo was 'loaned' for the rush — stayed 30 years

By 1932 Melbourne-based firms were already experiencing the great impact of the recession, and so it was that through Mr Clive Steel (later Sir Clive); brother-in-law of Mr Alan Bilson, that a young student engineering draftsman was "loaned" to Bilsons for three months to help out over the Christmas rush. His name was Les Atyeo.

**Christmas at Bilsons was always an exciting time with specific direction toward the children.**

One ex-customer nostalgically remembers that "Mr Alan Bilson sent a case of oranges and sweets to Devondale for the Christmas treat and asked if he may bring his children out to join in the celebration."

Mr Atyeo applied himself with such zeal that it soon became apparent that his real interest lay not in the draftsman's board but in the art of merchandising, this his tenure was increased beyond the Christmas period to a span of some 30 years.

He served in all departments and took a course in ticket writing.

**He was for some time attached to the office which was managed by Miss Margaret Bethune who, with her sister Miss Jessie, became known throughout the district for the efficiency with which they worked in this area.**

Miss Jean Coad was in charge of the Burroughs Machines and she was often asked by the promoters of these machines to demonstrate their use when new office systems were being installed elsewhere.

By 1938 the recession had well peaked and the business people of Colac felt a certain optimism; perhaps it was that industry was expanding not only with the success of

the formation of Bilsons Furniture Factory, but already a sound brick industry had been established in H. Thompson and Sons Brick and Tile Works, Colac Ice Works Pty Ltd, Colac Rye Grass Ltd, a Flax Mill and others, so that with the long-established industries such as the Colac Dairying Co., Colac Areated Waters, Bryan Bros Foundry, Mariner's Nuseries, contributed to the feeling of stability within the business community of Colac (by this time a Borough).

Much of this optimism was soon to fade by the obvious signs of drought — Lake Colac had receded to an extraordinarily low level, leaving a carpet of a dried and decaying form of Algae which soon became the breeding area for flies.

It was, however, on Friday January 13, 1939, that tragedy struck in the form of fire — the seemingly inevitable Australian follow up to drought.

This was described in one paper as "a giant blowtorch in the hands of a madman "having ignited the State.

"Sixty-nine mills were burned, millions of acres of fine forest and 50 people perished". (The death toll was late increased to 71.

By later afternoon a thick pall of smoke had

descended over Colac, and Bilsons' trucks, with others, had left with men and provisions and some had already returned bringing with them firefighters with swollen eyes and the news that the little village of Kawarren had been devastated and four young children had perished, and so, with the smoke, a sadness hung over the town.

**The rains eventually came and the countryside responded gradually, and with this recovery people became more cheerful.**

Bilsons rejoiced in the announcement of Mr. Les. Atyeo's marriage which was celebrated on July 1, 1939.

Who could have imagined at that time that one year later so many people's lifestyles would have changed?

It was on July 1, 1940 that Les Atyeo enlisted in the 8th Division, but was taken prisoner-of-war by the Japanese in 1942. Having survived this period he was discharged from the Army in 1945.

After the announcement by the Prime Minister, Mr Robert Menzies, on September 3, 1939 that "Australia is also at war" the practice and fortunes of business changed in a dramatic way; shortages both in staff and stock were soon experienced.



By the time Mr John Curtin, Prime Minister, announced that "as from 5 pm on December 8, 1941, a state of war existed with Japan", all medically fit men and women were being accepted into the armed or essential services.

Staff in some cases operated on a part time basis, being absorbed in such essential services as the Dehydration Factory at Rossmoyne where onions were processed and used to "liven up the stews" for the troops.

## Force

Mr Alan Bilson enlisted once more in the Airforce — this time it was in the Royal Australian Air Force and Mr Claude Burnett from Clarke and Eva (a firm of solicitors) replaced Mr Bilson and managed the firm throughout the tenuous times of war.

Mr F. O. (Bob) Bilson became an officer in the Australian Red Cross.

The Colac showground now housed a contingent of Light horsemen, with horses, and a navigation school had evolved for the Air Force at Cressy.

The store operated with a minimum number of staff, many of whom were very young, but it became the era of the "mature woman" for it was she who discarded her apron and locked away her tennis racket or croquet mallet "for the duration" and emerged beautifully groomed to become a most efficient shop lady.

A number of these women continued in these positions long after the war had ended.

Some women did this as part-time work and became involved in other wartime activities in a voluntary capacity.

A "plane spotting lookout" was built into the cricket pavilion near the lake, and women whose knowledge of planes had hitherto been negligible suddenly became most proficient in the identification of aircraft.

Evening shifts were taken by the men (sometimes by senior school boys) but if the young lad in Bilsons' grocery looked a bit dreamy when serving he could be excused on the grounds that he had probably been on duty all night "spotting".

Shop keeping was sometimes made very difficult for the "shop ladies", as indeed for all



Mr Les Atyeo  
Bilsons Manager

After the company was sold in 1952

the staff, as with the acute shortages of stock, customers sometimes prevailed on the good offices of staff to allow that little under the counter luxury of a pair of stockings.

## Books

Although ration books with appropriate coupons for groceries and linen had been issued, members of the grocery department staff were probably placed in the most insidious positions as once there was a whisper that a few cartons of Craven A's had arrived, friendships bloomed and withered just as long as it took to exhaust supplies — all that excitement until the next consignment arrived!

Grocery staff personally supervised food parcels to be sent overseas.

Some of the parcels authorised by Bilson's customers to be sent to Britain initiated friendships which lasted for many years in some instances.

With the end of the war, great celebrations ensued; Bilsons participated in the street parade with a "snappy float".

Men and women gradually returned from the war activities to Bilsons, sadly some did not.

Mr Alan Bilson resumed his position as managing director.

Mr Les Atyeo returned and subsequently became merchandise manager. Mr Veale took up his old job as factory manager.

Mr Alan Bilson's interest in the staff and customer relationship continued as did his community work within the town.

He was a member of the State Wages Board for shop assistants. It was this concern for the staff which led him to allow staff free time for haircuts, a policy which was later adopted universally throughout the state.

## Cash

Five percent discount for payment of accounts within 14 days was allowed, cash coupons were issued and could be redeemed in goods.

Bilsons had now joined with 15 other provincial stores to form a wholesale buying syndicate known as "Newtorian;" these included such leading stores as Youngers, of Warrnambool, Bright & Hitchcocks, of Geelong, Fords, of Bairnsdale, Leslies, of Sale, Langlands, of Horsham, Mates, of Albury, Millers, of Hamilton, and Callenders, of Wangarata.

The store had grown big in every way and the frontage rivalled Myer of Bourke-st, Melbourne, Bilsons having purchased Messrs Ray Croft Pty Ltd. at the east end of the building (Ray Croft's having removed to the south side of Murray-st.)

The firm continued to prosper. Many members of staff had been with the store for most if not all of their working lives. i.e Mr U. Paine (manager of the Shoe Dept) Miss D. Craike, and Mr F. Gavens, Manager of the Hardware dept.)

As the Forties proceeded into the Fifties, Bilsons continued to serve and make an annual profit something it never failed to do in all its 50 years of operation.

By 1950, however, the winds of change were felt in retail merchandising and the inevitability of mergers and takeovers became apparent.

After due consideration the possibility of floating a public company was rejected in favor of another option, so that in 1952 Bilsons amalgamated with the old and respected firm of Foy and Gibsons of Melbourne.

Mr Alan Bilson retired from the managerial position in favor of Mr Les Atyeo.

In the same year the store suffered a huge fire gutting the main part of

the building, rebuilding was carried out and the layout of the premises changed.

The grocery department effected a "new look" and took on the cash and carry trolleys.

In line with Foy Gibsons's policy, one door only was made in the Murray-st. frontage so that the impulse buyers would be exposed to the push lines displayed near the door.

Gone were the little buckets which plied their endless journeys backward and forwards on the thin overhead wire cables bringing change and dockets to the customer and the occasional "billet doux" to the handsome young man in the hardware department.

Thursdays no longer saw the farmers with their wonderful wide-brimmed Birregurra hats shaking hands with "Alan" and discussing the price of lambs at the market.

Gone were the small, high-backed bentwood chairs strategically placed for the comfort of the customer and with them, so it was said, some of the spirit and charm of the old store.

Foy-Bilsons as it was known continued to prosper, the social clubs connected with the firm worked in much the same way, but although the managers and staff strove valiantly to preserve the pattern of merchandising so acceptable to Colac and district clientele, the inevitability of change had to be conceded, and so signalled the demise of the "old Firm" and indeed for many a way of life, the loss of which was to be mourned for years to come.



Sources of Information: Australasian (1914), Colac & District Historical Society files & Colac "Heralds", "City of Colac" 1960, "Come to Colac" 1934, Colac Time Line 1982, "History of Colac" Hebb, "Henderson's Australian Families" Vol. 1, Melb. Herald Sept. 1939 to Dec. 1941, "Service" (the voice of the house of Foy & Gibsons June 1952 & 1953). The personal memories of late Mr Frank Callanan and those of many other kind friends and ex-customers.



